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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000093

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: LEADING HUMAN RIGHTS NGO FACES CLOSURE

REF: A. 06 MINSK 839

[1](#)B. MINSK 036
[1](#)C. MINSK 057

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In the GOB's latest attack on Belarusian civil society, authorities have formally taken steps to evict the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC), one of the country's last registered human rights NGOs, from its office. If the BHC continues to operate without a legal address, it could be liquidated and its leaders could face criminal charges carrying up to two years in prison. The threats of deregistration and possible imprisonment have left even the most dedicated human rights activists disheartened about the future of human rights groups in Belarus. End Summary.

BHC's Eviction Could Snowball into Criminal Charges

[1](#)2. (C) The Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC), one of the three remaining registered human rights NGOs in Belarus, has been given until January 27 to vacate the office it has rented from 1998. Since the Belarusian authorities unilaterally annulled its lease with the BHC in December 2006, allegedly due to late rent payments, the organization has unsuccessfully tried to rent one of the many vacant offices in the same building. Without a legal address, the authorities can liquidate the prominent human rights NGO at any moment. If the BHC continues to operate after it has been deregistered, the BHC leaders could face criminal charges that carry up to two years in prison for acting on behalf of an unregistered organization. The GOB used these same charges to sentence the leaders of independent election-monitoring NGO Partnership to up to two years in prison (ref A).

[1](#)3. (C) The BHC, a long-time recipient of USG and European financial support, most recently provoked the ire of the Belarusian authorities with its critical assessment of the January 2007 municipal election process (ref B). The NGO's eviction represents the latest episode in the ongoing legal battle between the GOB and the BHC that started in 2004 when the government fined the BHC for failure to pay taxes on a European Commission (EC) tax-exempt grant. (Note: While the EC has apparently offered to pay the taxes for the NGO, BHC head Tatyana Protko, the EU ambassadors in Minsk, and post generally view the EC's possible concession to the GOB as offensive, precedent-setting, and ineffective. End note.)

Despite Harassment, BHC Vows to Continue to Operate

14. (C) BHC officials are seeking ways to continue their work despite GOB harassment. Protko told Ambassador on January 25 that she is attempting to register the BHC at her personal residence. Protko conceded, however, that she does not expect to receive registration at that address since the BHC would need special permission from the authorities to register the NGO in a residential building. She promised Ambassador that the BHC's website would remain operational regardless of their official status in Belarus and that the BHC would use the website in addition to occasional face-to-face meetings to continue its work in Belarus. BHC deputy Garry Pogonyailo recently told independent reporters that the BHC could possibly continue operating as individuals rather than as members of an organization. According to BHC spokesperson Dmitriy Markushevskiy, the International Helsinki Committee has pledged to continue cooperation with the organization irrespective of its legal status.

Comment

15. (C) BHC leaders thus far have relied on their personal connections with key officials in Belarus' Ministry of Justice and on their ties in the international community to withstand GOB pressure. It now appears that the regime is willing to suffer another blow to its international reputation by shutting down the most prominent human rights NGO in Belarus. Protko privately expressed to Ambassador her deep (and understandable) concerns regarding the future of human rights activists in Belarus, particularly in light of perceived European calls for renewed dialogue with a regime that has defiantly ignored international criticism of its democracy and human rights record (ref C). The continued GOB harassment of human rights groups is clearly taking its toll on some of the country's most dedicated activists. The

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United States and Europe need to maintain a united front on our common disdain for the gross human rights violations in Belarus.

16. (C) Although post is aware that the BHC's situation was raised at the January 25 OSCE Permanent Council (PC), we believe it would be timely and appropriate to raise the issue again at the next OSCE PC.
Stewart